A Pragmatic Reading of the Last Supper: Revolutionary Continuity and the Politics of Sacrifice

Abstract

The Last Supper has been interpreted for two millennia primarily through theological and sacramental frameworks that emphasize mystical transformation, atonement for sin, and the establishment of Christian ritual. This paper proposes an alternative reading grounded in the political and economic context of first-century Judea: that Jesus's final meal with his inner circle represented a pragmatic organizing meeting in which a resistance leader, facing certain execution for attacking the Temple's extraction economy, instructed his followers to continue the movement after his death. The "body and blood" language, rather than establishing a mystical sacrament, conveyed a straightforward political message: "I am giving my life for this cause; remember why I died and continue the work." This reading situates the Last Supper within the broader pattern of resistance movements facing state violence, where leadership continuity becomes paramount. The paper examines how Jesus's challenge to the Temple elite necessarily provoked both Jewish religious authorities and their Roman overlords, making his execution a political inevitability that required no prophetic foreknowledge to anticipate. By recovering this pragmatic interpretation, we can better understand how early followers may have originally understood Jesus's final instructions before later theological developments reframed the meal as the foundation of Christian sacramental practice.

Introduction

On the night before his execution, Jesus of Nazareth gathered his closest followers for a final meal. According to the Synoptic Gospels, he broke bread and shared wine, declaring these elements to represent his body and blood. For two thousand years, Christian tradition has interpreted this moment as the institution of the Eucharist, a mystical sacrament in which believers consume the divine presence. Theological frameworks emphasize sacrificial atonement, covenant renewal, and supernatural transformation.

But what if we are reading institutional theology backward into a moment that was, in its original context, far more straightforward? What if Jesus, facing imminent execution for his assault on the Temple economy, was simply doing what any effective organizer does when the state is about to kill them: ensuring the movement survives their death?

This paper proposes a pragmatic reading of the Last Supper that situates it firmly within its political and economic context. Jesus had spent his ministry attacking the extraction systems that enriched the Temple elite and their Roman overlords. He had physically disrupted the Temple's economic operations. He had publicly condemned those who "devour widows' houses" while maintaining religious pretense. In a context where Rome crucified resistance leaders routinely and Jewish authorities collaborated in eliminating threats to their revenue streams, Jesus's execution was not a mysterious divine plan requiring prophetic insight—it was the predictable outcome of challenging entrenched power.

The Last Supper, in this reading, becomes a final strategic meeting. A resistance leader knows he will be killed. He gathers his core organizers. He tells them to remember him, to continue the work, to keep meeting and renewing their commitment to the cause. The bread and wine are not mystical transformations but powerful symbols: "This is my body and blood that I am about to sacrifice for our movement. When you gather, remember why I died. Don't let my execution end what we started."

This is not theology. This is organizing.

The Temple Economy: Understanding What Jesus Attacked

To understand why Jesus knew his death was imminent, we must first understand the economic system he had challenged. The Jerusalem Temple was not merely a religious institution; it was the central extraction mechanism through which wealth flowed upward to the priestly elite and, through them, to Rome.

The Temple economy operated through multiple revenue streams. Every adult Jewish male owed the annual half-shekel Temple tax, a mandatory levy that generated enormous wealth concentrated in priestly hands. Pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem for the required festivals needed to exchange their local currencies for Temple-approved coinage—a monopoly that the money changers exploited for profit. Most significantly, the sacrificial system required the purchase of approved animals, creating a captive market where the poor were obligated to buy from Temple-controlled vendors at inflated prices to fulfill religious requirements.

This was extraction dressed as piety. The Temple authorities had created a system where religious obligation generated cash flow, where the apparatus of worship itself became a mechanism of wealth concentration. The poorest were required to sacrifice what they could not afford in order to maintain ritual purity, while the proceeds funded the opulent lifestyle of the priestly aristocracy.

Archaeological and textual evidence confirms the Temple's economic centrality. Josephus describes the vast wealth accumulated in Temple treasuries. The Gospels themselves reference the Temple's financial operations—the money changers, the sellers of sacrificial animals, the treasury where the rich deposited their wealth while the widow contributed her last coins.

Economic historians examining first-century Judea consistently identify the Temple as the primary site of wealth accumulation, functioning as both religious center and de facto central bank.

Jesus understood this system. His parables consistently targeted economic exploitation masked as religious propriety. The Pharisees who "devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers" appear repeatedly in his teaching. His blessing of the poor and condemnation of the rich was not abstract spiritual metaphor but direct economic commentary: the system enriched some by impoverishing others, and it did so under religious sanction.

The Temple cleansing, then, was not a symbolic gesture but a physical assault on the economic infrastructure. When Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers and drove out those selling sacrificial animals, he was directly attacking the revenue streams that sustained the priestly class. This was not about worship purity in some abstract sense—it was about shutting down the machinery of extraction, even if only temporarily.

The Temple authorities could not ignore this. Jesus had struck at their economic foundation. He had publicly demonstrated that their system could be disrupted. He had shown the crowds that the sacred economic order was vulnerable to direct action. This made him dangerous in precisely the way that demanded elimination.

The Roman Interest: Why Stability Mattered More Than Theology

The Temple elite did not operate in isolation. They existed within the Roman imperial system, and their economic extraction served Roman interests. Understanding why Jesus's execution was inevitable requires examining not just Jewish religious politics but Roman imperial imperatives.

Rome governed through local collaborators. The imperial strategy prioritized stability and tribute over direct administration. In Judea, this meant allowing the Temple aristocracy and the Herodian dynasty to maintain internal order while ensuring that taxes flowed to Rome and that no significant resistance movements emerged. The high priests were appointed by Roman governors, ensuring their loyalty. Religious authorities became, effectively, imperial functionaries whose continued power depended on Roman approval.

From Rome's perspective, the theological content of Judaism was irrelevant. What mattered was that Judea remained pacified, that tribute continued, and that the local elite maintained order. The Temple system served these interests perfectly: it channeled religious devotion into an economic structure that enriched compliant local authorities while keeping the population focused on ritual obligations rather than political resistance.

Jesus's attack on the Temple economy therefore represented a dual threat. For the Temple elite, he endangered their revenue and their religious authority. For Rome, he threatened the stability

that made efficient extraction possible. A figure who could mobilize crowds, disrupt the Temple's operations, and articulate an alternative economic vision was dangerous regardless of his theological claims. Roman governors had crucified resistance leaders for less.

The historical context of first-century Judea makes this clear. Galilee and Judea seethed with periodic uprisings, messianic movements, and protests against Roman taxation and Temple collaboration. Rome's response was consistently brutal. Rebels were crucified by the hundreds. Villages suspected of harboring resistance were razed. The message was clear: challenge the system and die.

Pontius Pilate, the prefect who authorized Jesus's execution, had already demonstrated his willingness to use violence against Jewish protesters. Josephus records incidents where Pilate killed demonstrators, appropriated Temple funds for Roman projects, and generally governed with the casual brutality typical of Roman provincial administration. The idea that Pilate would hesitate to execute another troublemaker strains credulity.

Jesus's challenge to the Temple, therefore, was simultaneously a challenge to Roman imperial order. By attacking the extraction system that enriched the priestly elite, he threatened the collaborative arrangement that kept Judea pacified and tributary. Both the Temple authorities and the Roman governor had compelling reasons to eliminate him.

This was not mysterious divine providence. It was the predictable operation of power protecting itself.

Political Calculation, Not Prophetic Vision

The Gospel narratives present Jesus as prophetically foreseeing his death, announcing it to his disciples, and explaining its salvific purpose. Traditional interpretation reads these predictions as evidence of divine omniscience—Jesus knew he would die because he was God incarnate, and his death served a cosmic purpose in atoning for human sin.

But this reading confuses theological interpretation with political literacy. Jesus did not need supernatural foreknowledge to know he would be killed. He simply needed to understand how power operates.

Consider the political math. Jesus had:

- Physically attacked the Temple's economic operations
- Publicly condemned the religious elite who collaborated with Rome
- Gathered large crowds in a context where mass movements were viewed as threats
- Articulated an economic vision that challenged the wealth concentration of both Temple and empire
- Operated in a region where Rome routinely crucified resistance leaders
- Attracted the attention of authorities who had every incentive to eliminate threats

Any competent organizer in these circumstances would understand the likely outcome. This is not prophecy; it is basic political calculation. Revolutionary movements facing state violence develop a realistic assessment of risk. Leaders know that challenging entrenched power invites lethal response. The question is not whether the state will come for you, but when and how.

Numerous historical parallels illuminate this dynamic. Resistance leaders throughout history have understood that their challenge to power would likely result in their execution. They have prepared their movements for leadership succession, ensured ideological continuity, and accepted the personal cost of resistance. Some have made explicit farewells to their followers, instructing them to continue the work after their deaths. This is not divine foreknowledge but political realism combined with organizational necessity.

In Jesus's case, the evidence for imminent danger was overwhelming. The Temple incident had marked him as an enemy of the priestly elite. His growing following had attracted Roman attention. Passover, when he arrived in Jerusalem, was a time of heightened Roman military presence precisely because authorities feared uprisings among the festival crowds. The political temperature was obvious to anyone paying attention.

The Gospel predictions of Jesus's death, then, need not reflect later theological retrojection or miraculous foreknowledge. They may simply preserve a straightforward political assessment: "I have challenged the Temple and Rome. They will kill me for it. Here is what you must do when that happens."

This reading does not diminish Jesus's courage or commitment. If anything, it heightens them. Choosing to continue a movement knowing it will cost your life demonstrates extraordinary dedication. But it is the dedication of a revolutionary, not the predetermined sacrifice of a divine being. It is the same courage demonstrated by countless resistance leaders who have faced state violence rather than abandon their causes.

The Last Supper as Organizing Meeting

If Jesus understood that his execution was imminent and politically inevitable, the Last Supper takes on a different character. It becomes not the mystical institution of a sacrament but a pragmatic organizing meeting: a resistance leader's final instructions to his core team about maintaining movement continuity after his death.

Revolutionary movements facing state repression develop specific organizational practices to ensure survival. Leadership is distributed so that eliminating one figure does not destroy the whole movement. Ideological commitments are reinforced through ritual and repetition. Symbols are established that can carry meaning across generations. Followers are prepared for the emotional and strategic challenges that will follow their leader's death.

The Last Supper exhibits all these characteristics. Jesus gathers his inner circle—the core organizers who will need to lead after his execution. He shares a meal, the quintessential setting for serious conversation and relationship reinforcement. He establishes a ritual practice:

breaking bread and sharing wine with specific words and meanings attached. He explicitly frames this practice as something they should continue: "Do this in remembrance of me."

The language of body and blood, read in this context, becomes clear and direct. "This bread is my body"—I am about to give my physical body to this cause, to be broken and destroyed by the state. "This wine is my blood"—I am about to shed my blood, to sacrifice my life for what we have been fighting for. "Do this in remembrance of me"—when you gather after I am gone, share bread and wine as a reminder of why I died and what we are continuing to fight for.

This is not mystical transubstantiation. It is symbolic representation in service of political memory. The bread and wine become mnemonic devices, ritual elements that trigger recollection of purpose and recommitment to the cause. Every time the movement gathers and performs this ritual, they remember their founder's sacrifice and renew their dedication to the mission for which he died.

The content of Jesus's final discourse, as preserved in the Gospel accounts, supports this reading. He speaks about betrayal and denial, preparing his followers for the psychological trauma of his arrest and their own fear. He discusses leadership and service, establishing the organizational principles that should govern the movement after his death. He emphasizes unity and mutual support, the social cohesion necessary for a persecuted movement to survive. He speaks about future persecution, realistic about the dangers his followers will face.

These are the concerns of an organizer preparing a movement for the loss of its founder. They reflect political and psychological sophistication about what happens when the state eliminates a resistance leader. The disciples will scatter. Some will deny association out of fear. Others may betray the movement to save themselves. The organizational structure will be tested. Without their leader, the followers must learn to maintain commitment, support each other, and continue the work despite terror and grief.

The Last Supper, then, becomes Jesus's attempt to prepare them for precisely this scenario. The meal, the ritual, the words—all serve to create institutional memory and organizational continuity. When the inevitable happens and he is killed, they will have a practice that brings them back together, reminds them of their purpose, and sustains their commitment.

This reading does not require us to assume later theological invention or mystical transformation. It simply recognizes the Last Supper as what it appears to be in its historical context: a final meeting between a resistance leader and his core team, in which he prepares them to continue the movement after the state kills him.

Depoliticization and Theological Reframing

The pragmatic reading of the Last Supper raises an obvious question: if this interpretation is historically plausible, why has it been so thoroughly obscured by sacramental theology? The answer lies in the systematic depoliticization of Jesus's message as Christianity evolved from a Jewish resistance movement into an imperial religion.

The process began early. Paul, writing within decades of Jesus's death, already reframes the movement in ways that minimize its economic and political content. Where Jesus blessed the poor and condemned the rich in material terms, Paul spiritualizes poverty into humility and transforms Jesus's execution from political murder into cosmic sacrifice for abstract sin. The Lord's Supper, in Paul's interpretation, becomes a mystical participation in Christ's body and blood, focused on individual salvation rather than collective resistance to extraction systems.

This theological shift served crucial functions. It made Christianity compatible with imperial power structures that Jesus had challenged. By transforming his message from economic redistribution to spiritual salvation, by shifting focus from resistance to earthly authorities to acceptance of divine providence, early Christian theology created a version of the movement that could spread through the Roman Empire without threatening imperial interests.

The institutionalization accelerated dramatically after Constantine. When Christianity became the official religion of the very empire that had executed its founder, the political content of Jesus's message became not merely irrelevant but dangerous. An imperial church could not acknowledge that Jesus had died for challenging extraction systems like those the church itself now benefited from. The Temple elite whom Jesus condemned looked uncomfortably similar to Christian bishops accumulating wealth and power.

The sacramental interpretation of the Last Supper served this depoliticization perfectly. By making the meal about mystical transformation rather than political memory, about consuming divine presence rather than remembering a martyred organizer, theology erased the revolutionary content. The bread and wine stopped representing Jesus's sacrifice for economic justice and became vehicles for supernatural grace. The ritual gathering stopped being a recommitment to his political program and became an act of worship focused on individual salvation.

This reframing was not accidental. It served the interests of the emerging Christian power structure. A revolutionary Jesus who attacked wealth concentration and died fighting the Temple elite posed problems for a church that was itself becoming wealthy and powerful. A mystical Christ who died to save souls from abstract sin posed no such problems. The pragmatic organizing meeting became a sacred sacrament, political resistance became spiritual warfare, and the movement's founding message of economic justice was successfully buried beneath layers of theological abstraction.

The Ebionites, those Jewish Christians who maintained Jesus's emphasis on poverty and economic justice, who rejected the mystification of his message, were systematically suppressed. Their interpretation of the Last Supper—whatever it may have been—was lost when their texts were destroyed and their communities were erased. The fact that we know them only through the hostile writings of their theological opponents demonstrates how thoroughly the depoliticized version triumphed.

What remains in the canonical texts, however, are traces of the earlier understanding. Jesus's economic teaching, his condemnation of the wealthy, his attack on the Temple, his execution by

the state—these elements cannot be entirely erased. Reading them seriously, in their first-century context, points toward a different interpretation of the Last Supper than the one that became orthodox. The meal as organizing meeting, the bread and wine as political symbols, the ritual as movement continuity practice—these readings are not imposed from outside but emerge from taking seriously the political and economic context in which Jesus operated.

Comparative Context: Organizing Under State Violence

Understanding the Last Supper as a pragmatic organizing meeting becomes clearer when we examine how other resistance movements have faced similar circumstances. When the state targets movement leaders for elimination, certain organizational patterns recur across different times and places. Leaders prepare their followers for succession, establish rituals that can maintain identity and commitment, and frame their own deaths as sacrifices for the cause that must be honored by continuing the work.

Consider the pattern among twentieth-century resistance movements. Leaders facing assassination or execution frequently held final meetings with their core organizers. They discussed leadership succession, reinforced ideological commitments, and established symbolic practices to maintain movement cohesion after their deaths. These were not mystical rituals but practical organizational necessities. A movement cannot survive the loss of its founder without institutional structures that transcend individual leadership.

Labor organizers facing violence from corporate and state powers developed similar practices. Union meetings would include rituals of solidarity, symbolic actions that reinforced collective identity and commitment to the struggle. When organizers were killed—and many were—these rituals became ways of remembering the martyred and renewing dedication to the cause for which they had died. The symbolism was explicit and political: we remember our dead by continuing their work.

Revolutionary movements operating under authoritarian regimes show the same patterns. Clandestine gatherings would include symbolic elements—shared meals, ritual words, specific gestures—that marked participants as members of the resistance and reinforced their commitments despite danger. Leaders preparing for arrest or execution would ensure that these practices were established and understood, knowing that the movement's survival depended on organizational continuity that did not require their personal presence.

The early Christian practice of communal meals, as described in Acts and Paul's letters, fits this pattern precisely. Followers gathered regularly to share food, breaking bread and drinking wine in conscious remembrance of Jesus. They supported each other economically, maintained ideological commitment to Jesus's teaching about wealth and poverty, and faced persecution together. This looks remarkably like a resistance movement maintaining organizational cohesion through ritual practice after the state has killed its founder.

Paul's description of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians, while already beginning the theological reinterpretation, preserves elements of this original practice. He emphasizes that the meal should be shared communally, condemns those who eat without sharing with the poor, and connects the practice to remembering Jesus's death. Even in Paul's spiritualized version, traces of the original function remain: this is a gathering practice that maintains movement identity and commitment to economic sharing.

The ritual meal as organizational practice makes perfect sense in a movement facing persecution. When gathering is dangerous, when members risk arrest or execution, when the founder has been killed by the state, the community needs practices that reinforce solidarity and sustain commitment. Breaking bread and sharing wine while recalling the founder's sacrifice and the cause for which he died serves these needs precisely.

This does not require assuming later invention of the Last Supper narrative. It simply recognizes that what Jesus established at that final meal served functions common to resistance movements facing state violence: creating ritual practices that could sustain the movement after his execution, establishing symbolic language that could carry political meaning, and preparing his core team for the organizational challenges of continuing without him.

The Body and Blood: Political Metaphor, Not Mystical Substance

The central phrases of the Last Supper—"This is my body" and "This is my blood"—have been interpreted for centuries as mystical transformations, whether through transubstantiation, consubstantiation, or symbolic presence. But in the context of a resistance leader facing execution, these statements become powerfully direct political language.

"This is my body"—I am about to give my body to be broken, tortured, and killed by the state. The bread represents my physical sacrifice. When you break this bread, remember that I gave my body for this movement, for our fight against the extraction systems that oppress our people.

"This is my blood"—I am about to shed my blood. The state will kill me for what we have been doing. This wine represents the blood I will spill. When you drink it, remember that I bled for our cause, for economic justice, for resistance to the Temple and Roman power.

This is not mystical language. It is the straightforward symbolism that resistance movements have always used. Martyrs' blood waters the tree of liberty. Those who fall in struggle sacrifice their bodies for the cause. The language of bodily sacrifice permeates political movements precisely because it captures the reality: people give their lives for what they believe in, and their deaths must be remembered as inspiration for continuing the work.

The command to "do this in remembrance of me" reinforces this political reading. Jesus is not establishing a sacrament through which believers consume divine substance. He is creating a memorial practice through which his followers will remember his sacrifice and renew their

commitment to the cause. Every time they gather, break bread, and share wine, they will recall why he died and what they are fighting for.

Ancient Jewish memorial practices provide useful context. Ritual meals were common ways of maintaining communal memory and identity. The Passover Seder, which Jesus and his disciples were likely observing or anticipating, functioned precisely this way: through ritual foods and prescribed recitations, it transmitted historical memory and renewed commitment to Jewish identity despite persecution and exile. The Last Supper, establishing a new memorial meal, follows this pattern while shifting the content: instead of remembering liberation from Egypt, followers would remember Jesus's sacrifice in fighting the Temple elite.

The Gospel accounts themselves, despite later theological overlay, preserve the directness of the symbolism. Jesus breaks bread—a physical action representing his body being broken. He pours wine—a visual representation of blood being shed. The symbolism is visceral and immediate, not abstract or mystical. Those present would have understood perfectly well: their leader was telling them he was about to die violently for their cause, and they should remember his death as the price of resistance.

Later theological interpretations, particularly the development of Eucharistic theology, obscure this directness by insisting on real presence and mystical transformation. But this requires reading later doctrinal controversies back into a first-century Jewish context where they would have been incomprehensible. A simpler reading suggests itself: Jesus used bread and wine as symbols of the bodily sacrifice he was about to make, establishing a memorial practice through which his death would be remembered and the movement sustained.

This interpretation does not diminish the power of the Last Supper. If anything, it heightens it. Mystical transformation can seem arbitrary, even magical. But a resistance leader, knowing he will be executed, deliberately creating a ritual through which his followers will remember why he died and continue his work—this demonstrates profound strategic thinking combined with emotional and organizational sophistication.

The meal becomes more powerful, not less, when understood as a political leader's careful preparation of his movement for the crisis of his death. The bread and wine become more meaningful, not less, when recognized as symbols chosen deliberately to represent bodily sacrifice. The command to repeat the ritual becomes more urgent, not less, when understood as an organizational necessity for maintaining commitment after the founder is gone.

Movement Continuity: What Happened After Jesus Died

The pragmatic reading of the Last Supper finds support in what actually happened after Jesus's execution. The movement did not dissolve. The disciples, despite their terror and initial scattering, regrouped. They continued to gather, continued to teach Jesus's message, and continued to challenge the authorities who had killed their leader. The Last Supper's function as

organizational preparation for this continuation becomes evident in examining early Christian practice.

The Acts of the Apostles describes the earliest Jerusalem community engaging in exactly the kind of practices that would sustain a resistance movement. They gathered regularly for communal meals. They shared their possessions, practicing the economic redistribution that Jesus had preached. They continued to challenge Temple authorities, despite persecution. They maintained their identity as Jesus's followers through ritual practices including the breaking of bread.

This looks remarkably like a movement following its founder's final instructions. Jesus had told them to gather and break bread in remembrance of him—they did so. He had preached economic sharing and condemned wealth concentration—they practiced communal ownership. He had challenged the Temple elite—they continued to do so despite beatings and imprisonment. The Last Supper, as organizational preparation, had served its purpose: the movement survived the founder's execution.

The ritual meal became central to Christian identity precisely because it served crucial organizational functions. It brought scattered members back together despite danger. It reinforced communal commitment through shared symbolic action. It maintained memory of Jesus's sacrifice and the cause for which he died. It distinguished Christian communities from other groups through specific ritual practices. All of these functions are standard for resistance movements operating under persecution.

Paul's letters, though already beginning theological reinterpretation, preserve evidence of this organizational function. The Lord's Supper was a communal meal where economic sharing was expected. Paul condemns Corinthian Christians for eating without sharing with the poor, for turning the communal meal into occasions where some gorge themselves while others go hungry. This makes no sense if the meal is purely mystical sacrament, but perfect sense if it originated as an organizing practice meant to maintain economic solidarity.

The rapid spread of Christianity despite persecution also suggests that the Last Supper's organizational function was effective. New communities could be established with relatively simple requirements: gather regularly, share a meal of bread and wine while recalling Jesus's sacrifice, practice economic sharing, and support each other under persecution. This is a sustainable organizational model that can replicate across geographic and cultural boundaries without requiring centralized authority or complex institutional structures.

The fact that different early Christian communities developed varying interpretations of the Last Supper—from simple memorial meals to elaborate Eucharistic theologies—indicates that the original practice was adaptable enough to serve different contexts while maintaining core organizational functions. What remained consistent was the gathering, the shared meal, the symbolic elements, and the memory of Jesus's sacrifice. This consistency suggests a founding practice that was deliberately designed to be simple enough to maintain but meaningful enough to sustain commitment.

When institutional Christianity later elevated the Eucharist to central sacramental status, it was building on a practice that had already proven its organizational value. But the theological elaboration obscured the original function. What had been a resistance movement's memorial practice became a mystery requiring priestly mediation. What had been a communal meal emphasizing economic sharing became a ritual focused on individual salvation. What had been an organizing tool became a sacrament.

Yet even the sacramental version preserved, in distorted form, the organizational function. Christians continued to gather regularly, continued to perform the ritual, continued to mark themselves as a distinct community through this practice. The depoliticization was nearly complete, but the basic organizational structure that Jesus had established at that final meal remained functional.

Conclusion: Recovering the Political Jesus

The pragmatic reading of the Last Supper does not require rejecting Christian faith or denying the spiritual significance that billions have found in the Eucharist. It simply asks us to recognize that before there was theology, there was politics. Before there was sacrament, there was organizing. Before there was mystical transformation, there was a resistance leader preparing his movement to survive his execution.

Jesus knew he would be killed because he had challenged the Temple's extraction economy and, by extension, Roman imperial interests. This required no divine foreknowledge, only political literacy. His final meal with his core organizers served the practical purpose of ensuring movement continuity after his death. The bread and wine symbolized his bodily sacrifice for the cause. The instruction to repeat the ritual established a memorial practice through which followers would remember why he died and renew their commitment to his message.

This is not a diminishment of Jesus's significance. If anything, it heightens it by recovering him as a historical actor making strategic choices under conditions of extreme constraint. A revolutionary who chooses to continue attacking oppressive systems even knowing it will cost his life demonstrates greater courage than a divine being acting out a predetermined cosmic script. An organizer who carefully prepares his movement to survive his death shows greater strategic sophistication than a mystic establishing arbitrary rituals.

The systematic depoliticization of Jesus's message represents one of history's most successful ideological transformations. A movement founded on economic redistribution became a religion focused on individual salvation. A pragmatic organizing meeting became a mystical sacrament. The victors—those who benefited from the depoliticization—wrote the history and established the theology that has dominated for two millennia.

But the traces remain. Jesus's economic teaching cannot be entirely erased from the Gospels. His attack on the Temple is too well attested to deny. His execution by Rome for political crimes is historical bedrock. The communal economic practices of the earliest Jerusalem Christians

appear even in texts like Acts that are attempting to present a palatable narrative. Reading these traces seriously, in their political and economic context, points toward a different understanding of who Jesus was and what he was trying to accomplish.

The Last Supper, in this light, becomes something both simpler and more profound than sacramental theology allows. It becomes a final meeting between comrades, a leader's careful preparation of his team for the continuation of their struggle after the state kills him, a pragmatic establishment of memorial practices that would sustain a resistance movement under persecution. The bread and wine were not mystically transformed; they were deliberately chosen symbols through which followers would remember their leader's sacrifice and the cause for which he died.

Two thousand years later, billions still gather to break bread and share wine in Jesus's memory. The ritual has endured, even though its political content has been largely erased. Perhaps recovering that original content—understanding the Last Supper as an organizing meeting rather than a mystical sacrament—offers a path toward reclaiming Jesus's message of economic justice and resistance to extraction systems. The depoliticization was never complete. The possibility of reading these texts politically remains. And in a world still dominated by extraction systems that concentrate wealth upward while impoverishing the many, Jesus's political message remains as relevant as it was when he overturned the tables in the Temple.

When we break bread and remember Jesus, what are we remembering? A god who died to save us from abstract sin? Or an organizer who gave his life fighting economic extraction and who asked us to continue that fight? The answer to that question determines whether Christianity remains an opiate that justifies oppression or reclaims its founding as a resistance movement that challenged it.

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